

TALES FROM THE ARCHIVES OF ENDERAL

(SUREAI)



The Butcher of Ark

Premise

They call me „The Butcher“.

It hurts to write these words, though I am aware of their truth. What else should a man be called whose trail is marked by dozens of corpses, corpses which are not mute witnesses of a battle or an accident, no, corpses which are solely the result of my own doing. Men, women, elders, children. Priests, merchants, travelers and whores. My murders seem to follow an inscrutable pattern whose arbitrariness will put an icy veil around everyone's heart. But of course this will not be what heralds will proclaim. For them and the Holy Order I will be no less than a monstrosity, a pathless demon, who has been led astray by his own mundane cravings. They will call me an evil man, a beast with a heart black as midnight. Because these are the colors in which the world prefers to think: black and white. No one will ask about the how and why. Even these pages will be hard to acquire, for the Holy Order will surely do everything in its power to prohibit their printing – which is why I shall congratulate you, whoever you may be, for holding them in your very own hands. With this assembly of withered pages you shall be given an insight into my very own thoughts.

Do not understand them as a justification for my deeds, because this is not what they are. I assume full responsibility for what I have done and I desire no absolution, neither from Malphas – whose supposed “divinity” is something I nowadays merely smile upon –, nor from the people, from justice or some other strange, greater power whose true nature we have not yet learned to comprehend.

This book is no more than a testimony of strange and inscrutable happenings yonder, which have made me into what I am.

Chapter 1: Follow the Fire

It was a dull, cold and wet morning that should change my life forever. Yes... Somehow it almost seemed as if that day Mother Nature, as a response for the festivities of the preceding night, had decided to recover herself with a dreamy, nondescript day. The reason for the aforementioned festivities had been the so-called Star Summer Night, which every year marks the beginning of a new spring and in which the night sky is illuminated by dozens of wild, untamed starfires. While the common people, however, use the occasion to indulge in their mundane cravings – whether by drinking in smoky taverns, dancing around the first delve of spade, or having cultivated conversations on a masked ball –, for us clerics it means no less than a night filled with processions, sermons and prayer. After shortly attending the joyous speech of the mayor and giving my priestly blessing to the commencement of the festivities, I silently retreated into the temple and prayed until both my knees and my tongue were sore, just like the Holy Verses oblige every priest to do. It was of no significance whether the cleric was the High Priest in person or – as it was the case with me – merely a simple, insignificant Father in an even simpler and more insignificant village.

Mine was called Fogville and was situated on a constantly windy, sparsely vegetated cliff at the very west of Enderal. It owed its name to – who would have guessed that? – the pale, thin wafts of mist which every morning laid themselves over the village's countenance like a mourning veil over the face of an old widow.

I still remember this last gaze yonder, which I threw upon the poor houses at the bottom of the hill the village's temple was enthroned upon. After the dissonant orchestration of lute music, animated laughter and popping of corks, an almost eerie silence had laid itself upon the village. Only here and there a lonesome figure could be seen and heard moving through the cool mist, and even the bakery's chimney remained still. I feebly smiled into the face of the village I

had grown up in. My father, who actually wasn't my father, claimed to have found me wrapped in linen and lying in a basket near a wayshrine on the Mist Road. I had been abandoned, and the man who later became my father took me to the village, "full of devotion and grateful for the divine gift". However, before his untimely death, only ten years later, I never got rid of the feeling that his compassionate act was due to the fact that he found me right underneath a statue of Malphas, and not because of his wish for a child.

Gilmon the Tanner, as the villagers called him, was a delicate man with pockmarked skin and a slim nose. In his own opinion, the whole world conspired against him, which was the sole reason for his misery. We never talked much, but when we did, our conversations followed a general pattern. With his sawing voice, he called me to his fireplace room, where he rigidly sat most of the time, along with two empty tankards of beer. Then he indicated me to sit down and announced that he had „to get something off his chest.“ The fact that only his foundling son was there to listen was another proof for how badly life had treated him. It started right when I sat down. Tjalmar the Hunter had sold him rancid oils. An evil cutthroat, my father called him, but after all, it was in the nature of the Aeterna, he said, and in Enderal this fact was not as well known as in Nehrim. Or Matressa Zulja, who had served him bitter wine. A mean crone she was, he said, oh yes, but thanks to Malphas he had perceived her plan and cut her down to size. And then, of course, Rashik the Smith's twin boys. Rascals they were, both of them. No respect they had for path-abiding, hard-working people like him. But no manners were to be expected from a coal man and his breed. „What do they know about decency?“, he said, excitedly. „These folks do nothing but shag until the bed breaks down.“ It did not matter to him that Rashik was a Qyran living in third generation in Enderal, and that he preferred a long-term union with his mate over the promiscuous family clans of his homeland.

These conversations, his persistently sour breath, and the smell of

raw hides, leather and animal fats in the workshop made up a great deal of my childhood. Friends I had only a few to none, mostly due to the fact that my father made me work hard in the tannery as soon as I reached the age of five. If Mater Pyléa – I am sure of this now – had not by incident noticed my quick wit, I would still be there today, working between animal parts, stretched hides and slippery grease. Maybe the strange experience at that misty morning would have never happened. Yet she noticed, and that is how it came that on the day of my path consecration the aged priest proclaimed my holy path in a solemn voice. I, Jaél, Tanner's son, was predestined to entirely dedicate my life to Malphas' glory – as a priest. Of course, back then I did not fully comprehend what that meant, but the other children's awestruck reactions made me realize it was a good thing.

Thus I left the bleak tannery and only entered the old house at the end of the village to sleep there. For my foster-father, the „child abduction“ was only one more act of treason. Looking back, I think that the amiable Mater was the only real caregiver in my life. She taught me to read and write, and she taught me the essentials of herbal lore. With empathy and toughness she taught me what I needed to know to become part of the Endralean clergy. Ten winters later, I received priesthood and began to serve in the small temple. I did what an obedient priest had to do: I held services, I prayed, I maintained the temple and I heard the villager's confessions. Mater Pyléa left the village on her sixtieth namesday and moved to a retirement quarter in the Sun Temple of the capital, which I only knew from tales. A year later my father passed away, an event that, to my surprise, affected me deeply. Then, everything became lethargic routine, until that very day.

The man that I was then – was he a happy man? I am not able to tell. When I try to recall the first twenty-eight years of my life, my memories seem to be like fading words on an old parchment. My reason tells me that I was blessed, in a way. The life of a priest

was pleasant and constant, without highs and lows. I had enough to eat, I had a home and enough pennies to afford the services of a wandering whore from time to time. I knew that, according to the Holy Verses, at the end of my days I would enter the Eternal Paths, my Path trodden, my task fulfilled. But things turned out differently. After I had taken off my robes and wearily laid down under the sheet of sheep's wool, I noticed a strange and dull feeling in my stomach. Today I know that this unremarkable moment was the first time I encountered the fire. It was small, insignificant, only a weak glow, but it was there, knowing that I would wake up as a different man. However, on this gray morning I was too tired to pay attention to it. Exhausted, I wrapped my sheet around myself and was fast asleep a moment later.

I awoke in a dream.

I found myself on an idyllic forest glade, surrounded by green oak trees, whose leaves were moved gently by the wind. The setting sun stood at the horizon like molten blaze and threw a red light over the scenery. I savored the spicy, fresh air, which tasted of wet moss, morning dew and old secrets, mysterious, wild and clear, like life itself. In contrast to what we all know from the nightly journeys that we call dreams, I was fully aware of the unreality of the scenery. So I accepted it as if it was as natural as time's passing. I was stark naked, as on the day of my birth, but I was not ashamed. On the contrary: I felt strong, clear and free.

When I took my eyes away from the sky and looked in front of me, I saw her. She stood in an old ruin that was overgrown with ivy and whose collapsed walls and arches told of ancient times. She wore a gray, flowing robe that only allowed a glimpse of her femininity beneath. Her hood hung deeply over her face so that only the tender and delicate parts of her cheeks and chin were visible – a sight that could have come from the imagination of a Qyranian painter. Her dense, midnight black hair was tied into snake-like braids and fell down to her shoulders. Various things were interwoven in her hair:

old, faded coins that must have been minted by lost civilizations; small, finely polished bones from animals unknown to us; and strange ribbons whose colorful threads created an artful pattern. But it was not all this that hypnotized me and drew me towards the veiled figure in the ruin. It was her smile. With every step I took towards her, I fell deeper into its charm. It was not a lovely smile, as some might assume. It was a mixture of melancholy, rage, hope and love, a symphony of contradicting feelings which I thought to be irreconcilable. It was a smile that was able to speak great wisdom as much as orders that would mean the death of thousands. A smile born from truths recognized in otherworldly existences. Cold sweat ran from my pores, and I felt how apprehensiveness mixed with the peaceful bliss of the moment just gone.

I came to a halt a few steps before her, still staring at her magical smile like a starving man at a feast. For a moment I believed to recognize a glimpse of mirth in her features. But it faded away as fast as it had appeared. Then she began to speak. "You are dying, Jaél." Her voice was rough and tender at the same time, full of contrast. She spoke without mockery, pity or cruelty.

"Why?", I heard myself responding mechanically. "I am in the best of health." My answer was as pathetic and clumsy as it must appear to the reader of these yellowed pages, but I spoke them faster than I was able to think, without control. The woman nodded subtly, as if she had expected this very response.

„You affirm that you are of good health“, she paraphrased my words with a peculiar intonation. "But you fail to perceive the fabric of this world in all its intricacy." Slowly and regretfully, she shook her head, like a Magistra in the monastery school who got a foolish answer from a novice to a very simple question. Then she took her hands out of the robe's sleeves and indicated me to follow her. Even her walk had something of another world about it. Her body did not move with her steps, but seemed to float. Silent and obedient, I followed her through the old ruin. Today, after I had gone through

the vision in my thoughts many thousand times, I know that it was an old trading post. The walls and the rusty gate left no doubt about it. – But in the vision, I did not care about such banalities. To follow the figure in front of me was my sole purpose. She stopped in front of an old, overgrown tower, presumably once the heart of the ruin, and opened the cast-iron door, which swung aside in an eerie, silent manner.

“Go, Jaél“, she said. „Go and perceive the truth.“ These were the last words I heard until the horrid discovery inside the ruin. For when I was about to reply, she was gone. For the first time, a feeling of uncertainty mingled with the confidence that I had at the beginning of the vision. I was still aware of the fact that my physical body was lying on a bed in a modest chamber, in another world. Also I knew that I could decide to wake from the wonderful and terrible vision. But I did not. Why? – I am unable to say. Was it out of curiosity? Was it the sense of fate that covered the ruin like a thin, transcendent sleeve? I don't know.

I entered. The floor felt cold under my naked feet, and the dusty air that was only lit by a pale red sunbeam made me cough as it filled my lungs. The inside was almost empty, except for spiderwebs, weathered furniture and broken stones that had fallen from the crumbling walls. In the middle there was a wooden construction, an extraordinarily large, upright box. Hesitantly, I walked closer. A word came to my head, but faded from my mind as fast as it had appeared. I recognized how the fire of the setting sun extinguished and how it was replaced by a dull blue. Gentle, hazy fog started to cover the scenery, and everything that was peaceful and blessed before I entered the ruin was replaced by a sense of trepidation. Creeping, cold, wasting.

My hand moved along the surface of the strange box that was slightly taller than me. The wood was decayed and gray, and an odd smell came from it, like iron. It was sweet and tempting, but at the same time repellant. *Leave!*, flashed through my head. *Leave before*

you inflame it. I was unable to determine if it was I who thought these thoughts. But of course, I did not leave. Slowly my hand moved toward a gap at the side the of the box that allowed me to open its lid. As the hinge opened with a reluctant, mourning sound, I remembered the word that had slipped my mind. This time it did not vanish, it preserved in all its dreadfulness. The wooden construction in the middle of this abandoned ruin was no box. It was a coffin.

Even today I can hardly find the right words for the terror that stared at me from the decomposing inside of the coffin. Without any doubt, the creature before my very eyes was myself. There it was, the brown hair, thinning, even at the age of twenty-eight. There it was, the well-trimmed, dense beard that grew down to my chest, the beard that I grew to hide my unremarkable, longish face. And there it was, the crooked nose, giving my face a vulture-like appearance, making me avoid my own reflection in the mirror. But the body in the coffin was dead, clenched like in the moment of dying. Penned in like cattle, his head was pressed down to his shoulders by the small dimensions of the coffin, his unnatural posture a silent accusation. His body was pinched, his arms pressed to himself in a twisted manner. Much more gruesome, though, was the face. The skin was pale and had a greenish gray color like decayed tombstones. There were many deep fissures that were not bleeding, but displaying bare flesh and white bones. The beard was curly and wild, and maggots moved around in the tangled mesh, oozing a festering, doughy liquid that was dripping down to the stone floor. The man's cheeks were hollow, and his lacerated lips were opened in a twisted way that gave the impression of a tormented smile. His teeth were rotten and his tongue gray. But none of this was the reason for the bloodcurdling, panic-fuelled cry that escaped my throat. It was the eyes. Or, rather, it was the place where the eyes used to be on a healthy, living person.

But there were no eyes. Weak and pale like shrouds, the lids, devoid of any sense, hung over gaping black sockets. Contradicting

any logic, they seemed to stare at me, whispering, rotting, and dead. The same festering liquid that came from the man's beard trickled down the brows and disappeared in the empty eye sockets. No... No words can describe the terror that filled me when I looked at that deformed creature.

In panic, I hit the withered copy of myself, but I only loosened the body so it fell right toward me. I felt how the repellent, festering corpse water from the beard touched my lips, while a handful of maggots landed on my shoulder. For a short moment I was petrified. I held myself in my arms, like a twin his own deceased brother. But this was no twin. When the maggots tried to move up my neck, I pushed the corpse away with a shrill cry, wiped away the maggots and fled out of the ruin.

Meanwhile, it was night, and the full moon stood cold, white and unmoving at the sky. The veil of mist that formed inside the ruin faded as soon as I came outside and let myself fall to the ground, crying and breathing heavily. *I am dead*, flashed through my mind, again and again. *DEAD!* I uttered a panicky scream, a pitiful effort to banish the madness from my mind. The terror remained, it was omnipresent, and I felt bitter tears making their way through my eyes. *What, by the righteous path, does it mean? What kind of nightmare am I trapped in?* Some might ask why I did not end the vision with the well-known physical stimulus, by pinching myself, even more so because I was fully aware of the unreality of what was happening. The answer is, I was unable to do it, and I knew it. What I went through was not one of the usual, nightly phantasms that occasionally haunt us in the quiet hours. Something that I later began to understand at least a little wanted to show me something, and I was unable to escape the truth, as little as man can escape the sands of time. As I turned my gaze from the floor and started to crouch toward the stone arch and the forest, weeping helplessly, I saw her again. The veiled woman. She stood above me and stared down at me, almost with sympathy. At least I assumed so, because despite

the angle of my view, I was unable to recognize anything above her cheeks but the unnatural shadow of her hood.

„What are you?“, I brought forth in a weak voice. “What by the Black Guardian’s name are you? A demon? An angel of death?” It sounded pathetic, like the lament of a desperate child.

„You ask me what I am“, she answered again, an echo of my pitiful words. “And you assume I am a black angel of your god, come upon you to punish you. But” – a touch of maternal tenderness accompanied her rough voice – “you ask the wrong question, Jaél. For who I am is not of importance.”

For a moment I stared at her in confusion, unable to react to her enigmatic answer. I remained at the floor for a while, motionless, breathing frantically and panicky, looking at the veiled woman. After what felt like an eternity, I asked the question that needed to be asked.

„And what... what is the right question?“

For a brief moment, I saw what seemed to be a sad smile caress her red lips. “You inquire from me what only you can answer”, she said and began to walk towards the stone arch. “And I want to give you an advice.” She halted, looking like an unreal shape in the silver of the night. “An advice on how you can avoid the death of your soul.” There was a moment of silence. “End your false life. And follow the fire.”

Then the vision broke apart.